

**Integrated County Planning
Broome County**

**Community Forum Report
October 25, 2000**

INTRODUCTION

The following report summarizes the data gathered at the Community Forum on October 25, 2000 at the Ramada Inn, Binghamton, New York. The information gathered from the forum will serve two purposes. First it will provide immediate input for the current integrated plan being developed by the Broome County Department of Social Services and the Broome County Youth Bureau. This planning forum meets the county's requirement to hold a public hearing to seek community input.

Second, the data collected at the forum will serve as a living document for the Integrated County Planning (ICP) team. The ICP is engaged in a five-year process to reinvent the way in which county services are planned, allocated, and managed for children and families. This planning forum was framed around gathering input for ICP's long term goals, and therefore input collected at this planning forum will be utilized in numerous ways to assist in future endeavors.

The ICP team would like to extend their appreciation to all those who assisted with the planning forum and to all those who participated. The information provided at this event will be of invaluable service to the county.

METHODOLOGY

The planning forum was designed to elicit feedback in three specific areas: community assets, community challenges, and strategies to elicit larger community input. Participants were asked to comment on each of these three areas within the Touchstones model. The six Touchstone life areas provide a framework to ensure all areas of human development are addressed at the local level. Participants had access to information about ICP, Touchstones, and county level data to assist them in the process.

In an effort to solicit information from every individual, participants put all comments on post-it notes. Post-it notes were then placed with the appropriate Touchstone life area. Comments were then grouped around common themes and reported back to the large group.

Approximately 100 individuals attended the forum, representing a wide range of local human service agencies and constituencies. Participants appeared to be enthusiastically engaged in the process and completed each assignment thoughtfully.

RESULTS

In an effort to provide a brief summary report, the results presented here represent the general themes generated by the participants in the areas of community assets and community challenges/unmet needs in each of the six Touchstone life areas. Recommendations made by participants regarding strategies on how the county can best seek input from the larger Broome County community are not included in this executive summary. A copy of the raw data is available by contacting the Department of Staff Development, Department of Social Services, 778-2621.

Citizenship: Children and youth will demonstrate good citizenship as law abiding, contributing

members of their families, schools and communities.

Assets: Broome County provides a rich array of programs and services designed to develop responsibility and citizenship. Specific programs such as: DARE, Habitat for Humanity, Mothers and Babies Perinatal Network, First Ward Action Council, Safety Town, Scouts, Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, YWCA, Jewish Community Center, voter registration drives, neighborhood watch, and Church sponsored youth development programs were specifically noted as being successful in modeling good citizenship.

There are many opportunities for young people to engage in volunteer activity, coupled with a commitment by area schools emphasizing service to the community. Schools have included “character building” into curriculums, and some have instituted peer leadership programs such as the Youth Court into the broad range of school activities.

The Broome County community is also rich with educational programs and services for pregnant and parenting teens, and youth involved with the law. With teen pregnancy rates declining and a relatively low crime, Broome County’s investment with at risk youth appears to be paying off. A community rich in diversity and caring professionals has created an environment in which young people can flourish.

Additionally, a local media system that is willing to focus on positive efforts by highlighting activities such as: Southern Tier Volunteer Organization dinner, winter coat drives, CHOW, clean-up efforts, etc. reinforces good citizenship for all.

Challenges/unmet needs: Although participants acknowledged our community’s resources for pregnant teens and delinquency, many shared concerns that we must continue to develop and/or expand prevention programming. Several participants expressed specific concern over the involvement of youth in gang activity, and the ability of schools and the courts to deal with the problem. Participants noted the need for program expansion in the following areas: early intervention, training for teachers and school staff on problem behavior, drug and youth courts, dedicated services for JD/PINS, mentor programs, mental health services, after school activities, voter registration at age 18, and programs to engage parents in demonstrating good citizenship. We need to improve our ability to engage youth as a part of the solution, not the problem to be solved.

Many participants were also concerned about issues of tolerance and acceptance of racial, ethnic, and ability differences. Misinformation and prejudice regarding specific populations of our community have hampered our ability to live peacefully. For example, refugees, immigrants, individuals migrating from other parts of New York state, and individuals with special needs are often met with intolerance, indifference, and services that are not sensitive to their specific needs. We need to explore ways in which we can bring the community together.

These challenges are aggravated by the lack of transportation available in some parts of the county and the continual struggle for agencies, programs, and schools to collaborate.

Physical and Emotional Health: Children, youth, and adults will have optimal physical and emotional health.

Assets: Broome County has a wide range of quality support programs and services to meet the physical and emotional needs of children and adults. Specific examples cited by participants include: good hospitals, clinics, mobile “wellness” services (i.e. vans), variety of health prevention programs, perinatal services, WIC/PCAP, Senior Centers, network of athletic and recreational programming, peacetown puppets, mental health players, BEAR, First Call for help, MDCR team, parent resource centers, early intervention, CHOW, Broome County Health Department, Planned Parenthood Office for the Aging CASA/EISEP, Mental Health Clinic, Catholic Charities and Gateway. Community-wide effort focusing on the 0-5 population was also seen as a community asset.

Participants noted how easily some of these programs could be accessed in urban areas and that many services are offered free of charge. Financial support from Child Health Plus, Medicaid MAX, and Home and Community Based Waiver provide some consumers access to health services.

Physical and emotional health are enhanced by the lovely environment in which our valley community is located. Beautiful mountains, plentiful trees and grass, coupled with clean air and water, provide the basis for which good overall health can be maintained. Additionally, excellent parks, museums, libraries and community events all contribute to improve the quality of life for our residents.

Challenges/unmet needs: Client access to services is severely hampered by the lack of adequate health care insurance, especially for those individuals who do not meet the eligibility requirements for Medicaid or Medicare. Insurance coverage is especially insufficient for behavioral health services, prescriptions, and dental care.

Service areas in need of expansion include: family planning, home-based services, pregnancy prevention programs, preventive health care, nutrition and exercise, dating violence prevention, early intervention, psychiatric services for children and adolescents, child care for mildly ill children, substance abuse prevention, hotline services for teens, pediatric specialists, and respite care. Services need to be expanded to rural areas and for those without transportation.

Participants expressed concerns over systemic issues in the area of mental health, such as: lack of coordination of proposals of funding and agency services, long waiting lists, cumbersome intake processes, and delays in being seen by professionals.

Economic Security: Children, youth, and adults will have sufficient economic resources to meet their basic needs. Youth will be prepared for their eventual economic self-sufficiency.

Assets: Economic security has improved for Broome County residents in recent years. With all-time low unemployment rates and increased diversity in employment opportunities, the economy has stabilized. Economic conditions, coupled with the low cost of living and quality educational/vocational opportunities, provides Broome residents with an improved level of economic security.

In addition to a developing economy, Broome residents have access to a number of quality programs to assist in self-sufficiency, i.e. Self-sufficiency Center, grants to assist TANF eligible

residents, programs devoted to welfare to work and school to career, Consumer Credit Counseling, Habitat for Humanity, CHOW (and other food pantries), TRIAD, Meals on Wheels, and Independent Living Skills. Broome County is also committed to assisting special segments of the population in gaining self-sufficiency including: adults age 60 +, adults with mental and physical disabilities, and teens.

Challenges/unmet needs: Although Broome County residents overall are enjoying an improved economy, many of the employment opportunities available are low paying and lack benefits, making it difficult for many families to experience economic stability. Lack of transportation and affordable childcare during the evening hours and weekends challenge many families to maintain employment. Although the cost of housing is relatively low, property taxes remain high. Additionally some landlords have neglected their rental properties, forcing some families to live in unsafe environments.

We need to attend to our future economic needs by continuing to attract new companies and to secure the future of others in the area. This may be accomplished by developing and maintaining the cultural institutions in the area and continuing to offer incentives to businesses.

Service areas to be addressed and/or expanded: a welfare system that tends to be punitive and often treats clients poorly, elder care services, summer employment for youth, neglected children, domestic violence, increasing public knowledge about available resources, mentoring programs, and programs that help youth stay in school. Also, the low salary of human service professionals needs to be redressed.

Community: Broome County will provide children, youth and their families with opportunities to help them meet their need for physical, social, moral and emotional growth.

Assets: The Broome County community has a rich array of cultural, recreational and human service activities, making this community an attractive place to live and grow. Many specific programs and services were cited, addressing the following general areas: musical experiences, science centers, museums, two institutions of higher education, parent resource centers, senior centers, sporting, summer programs for youth, many religious organizations, teen centers, divorce recovery, great parks and swimming pools, library, and youth development programs. Many community activities are offered at no cost or for a low cost so that many individuals and families can participate.

In addition, the county enjoys a low crime rate, virtually no traffic, and provides an excellent highway system. At the core of our community's assets are diverse group residents who demonstrate their energy, commitment, creativity, and generosity to continually develop and maintain community activities.

Challenges/unmet needs: Our most central challenge is to improve the availability, quality, and affordability of childcare. We need to develop child care resources that are more flexible and that can meet the wide range of needs families have: i.e. before/after school, nights, weekends, sick care, respite care, etc. At the same time we need to focus on developing a

childcare workforce that is well trained and appropriately compensated.

Prevention programs should be strengthened, especially in the areas of health, drug/alcohol, teen pregnancy, homelessness, family violence, and youth development. We need to focus on the teenage population, ensuring appropriate cultural, recreational and human service programs are available to meet their age specific needs. Parents should be encouraged to participate in their children's lives. Agencies need to continue to work together to reduce duplication of services and to cooperatively plan for services.

Some expressed concern over funding, specifically regarding the Broome County Library system and intergovernmental issues impacting local governments. Additionally, concern over community leadership, in both the private and public sector was noted. The lack of representation of the diverse community in leadership roles and in planning activities needs to be addressed.

Also mentioned was the need to develop a transportation system for rural areas, increase weekend availability and off-hour transportation.

Education: Children will leave school prepared to live, learn and work in a community as contributing members of society.

Assets: Broome County has a variety of quality educational programs (public and private) dedicated to promote learning across the lifespan. We host a variety of early childhood education programs, quality primary and secondary education, and an array of higher educational degrees. Additionally, the community supports a number of educational opportunities outside the traditional classroom, i.e. Waterman, Zoo, Roberson, Kopernick, libraries, Rod Serling School of Performing/Fine Arts, Upward Bound, etc.

Progressive programs are augmented with quality, caring, committed educational staff, small class sizes, and the availability of breakfast and after-school programs. Our relatively low drop-out rates are indicative of how successful we have been in educating our youth. Alternative educational programs are also available to meet a wider range of student needs.

Challenges/unmet needs: Two specific areas of concern were raised: the need for expanded educational/vocational/training for adult learners and the need for more creative alternatives for youth who exhibit behavior and academic problems. A positive proactive approach is needed to serve challenging children and youth. Schools can be very rigid and rely too heavily on home tutoring, and "babysitting" approaches to education. With that said, many participants acknowledged the need for schools to expand support services for children and the need for human service agencies to make stronger connections to the educational system.

Specific academic areas that need more emphasis include: computer and math skills, health issues, i.e. smoking, pregnancy, drugs/alcohol, engage more youth in educational decision-making, assistance for students to be successful with new state standards, continue to work toward "drop-out" prevention, conflict resolution, and the development of good communication skills. Also, the continual need for before and after school care and preschool programs was noted.

Family: Families will provide children with safe, stable and nurturing environments. Adults will have the opportunity to live in safe, stable and nurturing environments.

Assets: As has been mentioned in previous Touchstone life areas, Broome County has a wonderful mix of cultural, recreational, educational, and human service programs to enrich the lives of our residents. Many of these activities and services are geared toward families. Human service programs are built on a strength-based model, placing family well-being at the center. In addition, family life is often inter-generational, with extended families rooted in the same community.

Challenges/unmet needs: A number of challenges were addressed: We need to continue to focus our efforts on prevention and support, prior to entry into the formal service system. Resources are available for DSS clients, but other families find services limited. Services need to be expanded to evenings and weekends, to better meet the need of working families, and should extend out to the rural areas. We need to do a better job advertising programs and services for families.

We should focus on providing more services in the home and work toward replenishing a qualified workforce available to assist in home based services. Assistance to working families with young children, i.e. affordable, accessible, quality child care, parenting programs, etc.. In addition, we should focus our efforts on assisting families with teenage children, especially the 16-18 year old population.

We need to work more closely with local business and industry to advocate for more flexible work schedules and benefits to assist employees in taking care of their family obligations. Additional support is needed for single parents.

In addition, we need to continue to attend to family violence issues, lack of families willing to adopt, ensure safe, affordable housing is available for low income families, and work to protect families against housing code violations, etc. We should explore the concept of mentoring families and support activities that connect neighbors together.